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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION
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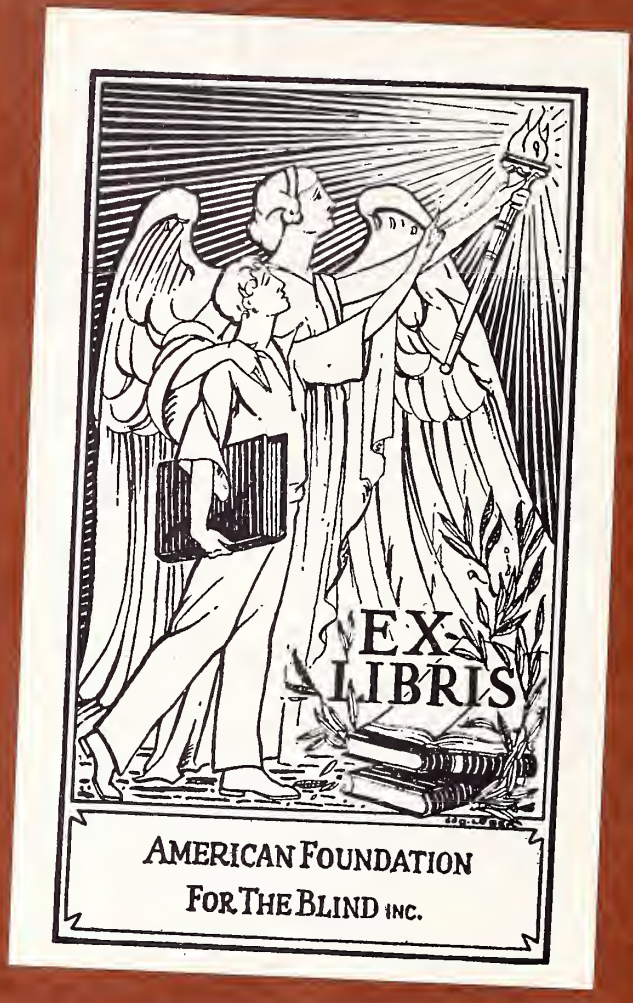
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THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

Work with the Blind and Sight Conservation Classes
of the Public Schools of New York City.

June 1929.

True, Nancy A.

The Department of Public Education of the American Museum of Natural History works with the totally blind and children of defective eyesight in two ways - first by instruction here in the Museum and second by material sent to the schools themselves. In cooperation with the Board of Education, regularly scheduled talks are held for the children of the Public Schools, while specially requested talks and museum trips are arranged for private organizations, such as the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind and other similar schools. Nature study material is sent to the schools themselves when requested, while nearly all public schools where children of defective vision are taught are supplied with special large relief globes.

The class instruction for the public schools is probably the most important and extensive of the Museum's work with the blind. In New York City the blind children and those whose vision is defective attend the regular schools, but are grouped for special instruction into special classes, the blind classes being composed of boys and girls whose eyesight is nearly lost and the sight conservation classes being composed of children whose eyes show varying degrees of defectiveness - a few nearly normal, but the majority quite subnormal. Most of the classes with which the Museum deals are of this latter type - the sight conservation classes - although several of the blind classes visit the Museum during the year. Of course, the difficulties of transportation limit the travelling of the totally blind. The aim of the Museum instruction is to enlarge and supplement the necessarily limited knowledge of these children in natural history, geography, history, civics and health by giving the children the opportunity, not only to see but in so far as is in any degree possible, to handle material illustrative of various phases of these subjects.

Every Spring and every Fall, the Department of Public Education in consultation with the Director of the Blind and Sight Conservation Classes of the New York City Public Schools makes out a list of ten talks including topics correlating with the curriculum and related to natural historyk geography, history, civics and health, and sends these to the individual teachers of these classes. The teachers choose the talks in which they are interested, check the day and hour most convenient for them, and return the slips to the Museum. A definite schedule of dates is sent back to the teacher, who then visits the Museum with her class on the dated specified, unless circumstances arise which make further adjustments necessary. The schedule is made as elastic as possible to allow for cancellations and subsequent rescheduling.

Several days before each class the teacher is sent a postcard reminder.

When the class reaches the Museum, it is taken to one of the smaller classrooms in the School Service Building, a wing of the Museum especially devoted to the work of the Department of Education. There a Museum instructor takes charge of the work. The instruction is done in so far as possible by explaining and examining actucal material rather than by giving formal lectures. The children are allowed to handle the material, when possible, and to look it over very carefully. Although the blackboard and occasionally slides and motion pictures are also used, the main emphasis is laid on the examination of actual material. For instance, in the talk on Indian Life, the children are allowed to handle, among other things, a beaded dress, a cradle board, a birchbark dish and bow and arrows. In the nature talks like those on birds and mammals, the children see and touch mounted specimens of these animals. In the spring and early fall, a park trip is usually planned to supplement at least one of these nature talks. In some nature classes, live animals are used, as, for instance, live snakes and turtles in a class on reptile life, live goldfish in a class studying the functions and habits of the fish, and live frogs' eggs, tadpoles, toads, etc., in a class on pond life in the springtime. Of course, real plants and flowers are also used. Nature study seems to be especially adapted to these classes where instruction is made as individual as possible and where the children are given every opportunity to closely examine specimens not only with their eyes but with their fingers.

This individual instruction of course necessitates a small group; indeed most of our classes number about ten pupils sometimes all of about the same age and grade, but more often ranging from children about six or seven years old to boys and girls in their early teens - a factor which makes individual instruction even more necessary. Because of the handicaps of the children and the individual type of the instruction, the subjects are made as simple as possible, a few, rather than many points being considered.

In addition to the regular classwork, as before mentioned, special talks and museum trips are arranged at the request of several private institutes for the blind. These are usually on some nature subject such as the structure and habits of some of our common wild animals. The children are given an opportunity to thoroughly feel and become acquainted with specimens in the classroom and are thereafter taken out to the exhibition halls, where they are often allowed to touch the exhibited specimens, especially some of the larger ones, like the African elephants. These specially arranged classes are not limited to private institutions, for any teacher in the public schools may request a special talk or trip. For instance, one teacher is giving a lesson on the eye, using a museum model at the museum. During the spring of 1929 the Museum has arranged and paid for bus transportation for special visits of the totally blind classes.

Besides this class work with the blind and children of defective vision, a great deal of nature material, such as mammals, birds, mollusks, etc., is sent directly to the schools. One of the most valuable kinds of material furnished is the large relief globes on which the continents, mountains, etc., are raised, the rivers depressed, and the coast lines sanded so that fingers may learn what eyes cannot see. Nearly every school in which there is a blind

class is furnished with one of these globes and the teachers report that they are almost invaluable in the teaching of geography.

Such in the work of the Department of Education with the children of defective eyesight - in the Museum, the regularly arranged classes in nature study, geography, history, civics, and health; the specially arranged talks and museum trips; in the schools, the supplying of nature material and the relief globes.

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